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# From The Angel to Orpheus: Fictions of Self-Transformation in Rilke's Late Poetry

Peter McCormick

In a letter to one of his friends a year before he died in 1926 Rilke wrote of the connections between his last works, the "Duino Elegies" and the "Sonnets to Orpheus": "Elegies and Sonnets support each other constantly. And I consider it an infinite grace that, *with the same breath*, I was permitted to fill both these sails: the small rust coloured sail of the Sonnets and the Elegies' gigantic white canvas."<sup>1</sup>

These poems have long interested Rilke's most accomplished readers and translators for different reasons. One pivotal concern is clearly the relation in Rilke's work between the figure of the angel in the Elegies and the figure of Orpheus in the Sonnets. I should like to begin with a distinguished recent interpretation of that relation, that of the American poet and critic, Robert Hass.<sup>2</sup> My concern will be to call attention to one peculiar effect some poetic works can have on competent readers, what I will call the presentation of certain ethical ideals, as here, the invitation to a transformation of the self. But the notion of self-transformation is obscure. Consequently, I would then like to investigate critically two recent accounts of personal identity with a view to locating conceptual resources for articulating the notion of self-transformation more clearly. With these resources in hand I want finally to return to Rilke's later poetry and offer a sketch only of that breath which filled the small rust-colored sail and the gigantic white canvas of his late poetry, a sketch of a kind of nothing.

## 1. Poetic Fictions and Self-Transformations

Rilke spent the winter 1911-1912 high on the coast of the Adriatic sea at the castle of Duino. In one of the extraordinary moments of his life while walking in a furious storm he later wrote his host, "...it seemed a voice had called... 'Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angels' hierarchies?'" He copied this line down and, by the evening, he had written the first of what he already knew would finally be ten elegies, the Duino Elegies. Here is the celebrated opening of that first elegy:

Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angels'  
hierarchies? and even if one of them pressed me  
suddenly against his heart: I would be consumed

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in that overwhelming existence. For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror, which we still are just able to endure, and we are so awed because it serenely disdains to annihilate us. Every angel is terrifying.

"... the angels embody the sense of absence," the critic, Robert Hass, comments, "which had been at the center of Rilke's willed and difficult life. They are absolute fulfillment. Or rather, absolute fulfillment if it existed, without any diminishment of intensity, completely outside us...."<sup>3</sup> This reflection is then elaborated:

You feel a passion for someone so intense that the memory of their smell makes you dizzy and you would gladly throw yourself down the well of that other person, if the long hurtle in the darkness would then be perfect inside you: that is the same longing for the angel. The angel is desire, if it were not desire, if it were pure being. Lived close to long enough, it turns every experience into desolation, because beauty is not what we want at those moments, death is what we want, an end to limit, an end to time. And — ...death doesn't even want us; it doesn't want us or not want us. All of this has become clear suddenly in Rilke's immensely supple syntax. He has defined and relinquished the source of a longing and regret so pure, it has sickened the roots of his life. It seems to me an act of great courage. And it enacts a spiritual loneliness so deep, so lacking in consolation, that there is nothing in modern writing that can touch it. The company it belongs to is the third act of *King Lear* and certain passages in Dostoevsky's novels (xxxiv-xxxv).

Now, the critic here is doing at least three things—he is putting into his own words what he thinks the speaker in this poem is saying while taking this speaker to be Rilke himself; he is interpreting Rilke's poetry as both a definition of a peculiar species of personal longing and an act of relinquishment which has unusual consequences; and he is judging the sense of what he takes to be going on here in ethical terms.

In particular, the critic understands Rilke to be using the figure of the angel as a representation of an impossible project, namely the perfect fulfillment of our deepest longings as human beings. This representation "lived close to long enough" is utterly inimical to a person's vitality. For with such a resplendent figure too much before us we are filled with such profound regret that we lose the will to live. And, even while recognizing that death itself is a mundane phenomenon indifferent to our plight, we want to die in order to still this infinite yearning for what is impossible and to do away with regret.

Rilke is understood as defining a central fact about what it means to be a human being — namely, to enact endlessly an experience of basic

incompletion — and then to relinquish the search for a complete personal fulfillment finally seen to be impossible. But the figure which represents the satisfaction of the infinite longing for completion remains always present. Thus, the relinquishment results in a profound "loneliness" utterly "lacking in consolation."

Finally, the critic judges Rilke as having in this poem accomplished an act of great spiritual courage. What the critic finds courageous is Rilke's working so hard to define something essential in part of what it means to be a person while at the same time relinquishing any belief in an ineradicable hope having any substance. Rilke is courageous because he has worked to define clearly the nature of an inalienable hope which is finally an illusion. And because Rilke recognizes that such a work must result in relinquishing even the hope of consolation, he must undergo a profound spiritual desolation.

Now this reading of Rilke's late poetry, whatever its faults, has the merit of focussing our attention on one of the central figures and themes of Rilke's achievement. But if it is to bring essential features into clear view such a focus requires of us a sustained effort to distinguish between genuine effects of the poet's work and spurious side effects of the critic's apparatus. In this case I think we need to analyze much more carefully than the critic does here the all too familiar and all too obscure talk of transformation. What sense can it make to talk of Rilke's self-transformation in his late poetry? To treat such matters more carefully we will find it helpful to investigate briefly some current work on the nature of the person and personal identity across the temporal phases of a life.

## 2. *Persons and Their Identities*

In one of the most important recent works<sup>4</sup> on the nature of the person the claim is urged that "the unity of a life involves no more than the various relations between the experiences in this life...". Persons of course are not just series of events, actions, and thoughts; they are also agents and thinkers. But persons do not exist as separate entities.

We need to distinguish what this view rejects from what it accepts. This view accepts the idea that the lives of most human beings are properly characterized in terms of psychological and physical continuity and connectedness because human beings have overlapping memories, intentions, dispositions, traits, etc. connecting the earlier and later phases of their lives. But this view rejects the idea that the identity of a person requires something more than physical and psychological continuity and connectedness, namely the perduring existence of some more fundamental and purely mental separate entity (whether this be a substance, a Cartesian ego, a soul, or an elusive self) which is the unique subject of that person's memories, inten-

tions, dispositions, traits, etc.

The account then is benignly reductionist. For, while accepting that the person is not just a stream of events, this view nonetheless reduces the person to a set of experiences of physical and psychological continuities and connections whose unity is a matter of degree subject to important variations over time. Beyond such continuities and connections nothing else is either logically required for personal identity to hold nor indeed is to be found.

What counts here is not the claim that a person is rightly described in reductionist terms. Rather, what really matters is "... the prolonging of psychological continuity, or, more importantly, of those direct connections between phases of a mental life, the overlappings of which yield, in an ordinary life, the psychological continuity that characterizes it from beginning to end...this connectedness-and-continuity, though normally a feature of continued identity, is theoretically separable from it...it is, perhaps, of all the features of continued identity the one that matters most for us."<sup>11</sup>

Now when we return to Rilke's poetry with this account in hand we come upon such lines as these:

Song, as you have taught it, is not desire,  
nor wooing any grace that can be achieved;  
song is reality. Simple, for a god,  
But when can we be real? When does he pour

the earth, the stars, into us? Young man,  
it is not your loving, even if your mouth  
was forced wide open by your own voice—learn

to forget that passionate music. It will end.  
True singing is a different breath, about  
nothing. A gust inside the god. A wind.

(Sonnets I.3)

But such demanding counsels assume an understanding of the person which arguably shows up at least three important difficulties in the present account.

First, this account does not provide a sufficiently detailed description of how experiences are to be understood without postulating subjects of experience. How are Peter's musings in the rose garden to be understood without Peter? More specifically, the stress on physical and psychological continuity and connectedness requires paying some attention to the fact that these experiences "are causally dependent on the continued existence (identity) of the individual person."<sup>12</sup> To preserve such experiences seems to require preserving the entity they depend on.

Second, this account is too much centered on the person as an individual. One consequence is that the critical matter of the person's identity as a social and cultural entity is often passed over in silence.

This social dimension of personal identity most basically involves understanding the person in relation to others. But no account of personal identity in terms of individual identity alone seems adequate.<sup>6</sup> Part of what being Peter in the rose garden involves is coming from being Peter in the seminar room.

Finally, this account is consistently articulated in third person terms. The result is an extremely curious picture of the person from the outside only, an exterior view. "Philosophically speaking," one critic writes, "this account views everything from the outside. In dealing with personal identity, this conceals...one of the main reasons why people think that it must be a determinate question whether some future experience will be theirs or not: that if it will be theirs, they can, as well as expecting that it will happen, also expect it, in the sense of imaginatively anticipating having it; and there seems to be no reason for the idea that it is simply indeterminate whether I can appropriately do that or not."<sup>7</sup> What we require in an account of the person is an interior view as well, what we may call a first person account.

Can we preserve the attractive economy of a reductionist view of the person that will incorporate a more credible description of the individual and social experiences of the person in first person terms as well? More specifically, what elements in a revised version of a reductionist account would speak to Rilke's arresting figures of transformation?

### **3. *Leading the Lives of a Person***

Reductionist views like the one just considered, a second recent account<sup>8</sup> of the nature of the person and personal identity goes, always try to account for the unity of the person by trying to explain the relations among the various events that make up the physical and psychological continuities and connectedness of a person's life. But this attempt, it is asserted, cannot succeed, because no two events can be construed as part of the unity of a person's life without presupposing the logically prior existence of some underlying entity. This entity is the person, and the existence of persons has priority over the existence of their own mental states. This objection to the first account follows from a rich description of what it is to live the life of a person.

The unity of a life, the non-reductionist story reads, is what constitutes the identity of a person. And this unity must be understood as the unity of a whole not as the unity of a collection. Both a whole and a collection consist of parts. But the parts of a whole exhibit a different kind of unity than what holds among the parts of a collection. For living a life has consequences which affect what shapes the whole of a life will assume.

Further, an important place must be made in the understanding of personal identity for the phenomenon of death. Just as some projects



have subsequent effects of such an order that the whole of a life is changed, so the thought of death as the limit of a life exercises an antecedent effect on the shape which the whole of a life may assume. And neither the denial that death is a misfortune nor the assertion that life is immortal do justice to how the phenomenon of death shapes the unity of a life.

Moreover "A person leads his life at a crossroads," this account goes, "at the point where a past that has affected him and a future that lies open meet in the present". The person stands always at a crossroads in the sense that the person is always moving from a present moment towards the realization of certain future concerns which themselves arise out of past influences.

Being a person also involves living through the fullness of our intentional states—spasmodic phenomena like "perceptual experiences, attacks of dizziness, dreams, moments of terror, amusement, lust, or despair." Moreover, the person always experiences such states in a peculiar way. Thus mental states seem to consist of both an intentional and a subjective component.

Being a person furthermore involves being drawn to unify the different temporal phases of one's life. A person's basic attachment to his life is not based then either on the Hobbesian desire for biological continuation of the species or on the Benthamite desire for the pursuit of the varieties of pleasure, but on the aspiration to lead one's life by continually rearticulating "the process of deliberation that marks our lives as human agents".

Finally, being a person involves living through progressive and qualitatively different changes in one's own evolution as a moral agent by attaining a progressively fuller insight into one's own nature. This progression takes place to the degree that a person manages to transform three cardinal relations — the relation between the person's past and the present, that between the person's mental dispositions and mental states, and the relation between the person's conscious and unconscious mind.

Now these six elements combine and interact in different ways. But the gist of this second account can be put as follows: "...we are forced to conceive of our lives as shaped around a substantial self, and ... part of what it is to live a human life is to be continually revising one's way towards an adequate conception of what that self is."<sup>9</sup>

Once again however, when we return to Rilke with this second view in hand, we come upon important passages which undermine its plausibility. How for example can such an account do justice to the kind of entity these lines address?

Be forever dead in Eurydice — more gladly arise  
into the seamless life proclaimed in your song.  
Here, in the realm of decline, among momentary days,  
be the crystal cup that shattered even as it rang.



Be — and yet know the great void where all things begin,  
the infinite source of our inmost vibration,  
so that, this once, you may give it your perfect assent.

To all that is used-up, and to all the muffled and dumb  
creatures in the world's full reserve, the unsayable sums,  
joyfully add yourself, and cancel the count.

(Sonnets II.13)

In this context, how satisfactory is the central claim that the concept of a person is logically prior to the mental states that can be predicated of the person? At one point the argument is offered: "If it is true that mental states arise, they must essentially belong to things that can house dispositions, and this is where the person is required". But mental dispositions could more economically be lodged in the brain of a person considered reductively as no more than a series of psychological and physical states than put up prodigally in a separately existing entity.<sup>10</sup> Whatever Peter is need involve nothing more than being Peter at the seminar and being Peter in the rose garden.

A further difficulty is the detailed description of mind here in terms of mental dispositions, mental states, and mental activities, desire, fantasy, and imagination. This description turns on a functional view of mind that "a disposition tends to induce mental states and behaviour which reinforce it; moreover, these effects occur *because* they reinforce it."<sup>11</sup> Such a view, however, is not convincing. For it blinks the fact that exercising some dispositions may result not in the reinforcement of a disposition but in its loss. Leaving the seminar discussion for a walk in the rose garden may lead not to the desire for still more garden walks, but to the desire for none whatsoever. (Moreover, not all individual dispositions are to be understood just in the evolutionary terms of contributions to survival since not every single disposition is functional; some, say certain forms of altruistic behaviour among mammals, are in isolation dysfunctional.)

Can we articulate a theory of the person then that would capture some of the genuine insights this non-reductionist account exhibits into the nature of the person as an activity which lives its life intentionally and subjectively without overcommitting ourselves to a merely functional view a mind, or to an insufficiently argued assertion that some further fact is required for the identity of persons than physical and psychological continuity and connectedness? More particularly, just which, if any, of the numerous elements in a revised version of a non-reductionist account can satisfactorily conceptualize Rilke's concerns with self-transformation?

#### 4. Describing Persons Impersonally

Now these two accounts of the person and personal identity over time

clearly conflict. The first view, the reductionist view, explicitly affirms (P) that the personal identity of a person over time consists in nothing more than the continued existence of that person's brain and body and various interrelated physical and psychological events. This claim means: (P1) no separately existing entity is required for a complete description of such an identity; (P2) no distinct although not separately existing entity is required either; and (P3) a complete description of personal identity can be entirely impersonal. By contrast, the second view, the non-reductionist view, explicitly denies (P), and consequently denies (P1), (P2), and (P3) also. Thus we seem to be confronted with a clear choice between one or the other; in no case, it would seem, can we hold both, since one cannot rationally affirm and deny the same thing.

I want to show that the necessity for choosing between these two accounts is apparent only. For, although affirming both accounts clearly seems contradictory, the basic opposition between them is not properly described in terms of a pervasive logical incompatibility.

Recall first that more than one question is at issue between the reductionist and the non-reductionist. The central issue, however, seems to be the same; namely whether the nature of the person is properly understood in relational terms only, or whether some entity in addition to the brain, the body, and mental experiences must be introduced. The reductionist settles for the more economical view. But this interpretation of the discussion strikes me as superficial in two ways. It overlooks the different ways in which the phrase "the nature of the person" is understood in each of these accounts. And it also overlooks several responses in each of these accounts to more than just this question. I want to spend a moment on the first only of these points.

For the reductionist, "What is the nature of the person?" is to be understood as the narrow question whether the identity of a person's existence is composed of physical and psychological continuities and connections over time and no further fact (P:215). By contrast, for the non-reductionist "What is the nature of the person?" is to be understood as the broader question whether the identity with itself of the process of living a life as a person can be understood without appealing to some enduring entity other than the interrelatedness of appropriate psychological or physical events. (W:11). Evidently, these two questions are closely connected. Each is concerned with whether, and if so, then just how a person can properly be said to perdure as the numerically same person over time. Each is also concerned with specifying certain features which would serve as criteria for the claim that, say, Peter on the garden path is the numerically same person as Peter in the seminar discussion. And each is acutely sensitive to providing an account which, in one way or another, leaves the decision between materialism and immaterialism an open matter.

But, while similar, these two questions are just as clearly different. The reductionist question is much more narrow than the non-reductionist one. Indeed, this is one of the charges used in support of the claim that the reductionist account is inadequate (W:15). Moreover, the reductionist question is less exposed to the charge that it conflates the identity relation with the unity relation than the non-reductionist thinks, for the reductionist himself distinguishes between explaining the unity of consciousness at any time and the unity of a whole life (P:216-7). Further, the reductionist question allows for an indeterminate answer in some cases (consider brain bisection or brain transplants or tele-transportation of brain states), whereas the non-reductionist question insists that any answer must be determinate. Moreover, the reductionist question involves the claim that an impersonal answer can be a complete one, whereas the non-reductionist question rejects such a claim. And, finally, the non-reductionist question, but not the reductionist question, allows an answer in other terms than necessary and sufficient conditions. The reductionist account recognizes that other features may be important in any answer that is proposed to the reductionist question, but those features are seen to be supplements merely to the essence of the solution which is the conjunction of necessary and sufficient conditions in a criterion for personal identity over time. The non-reductionist account recognizes the interest in including in a reply such a criterion; but it relegates this criterion and those conditions to a subordinate role and reserves the principal role for the provision of as full a set of descriptive features as one can obtain.

Now these facts suggest that judging the non-reductionist charges against its rival as correct is a mistake. Similarly, something seems to be just as wrong in construing the reductionist charges against its rival as correct. The mistake in both cases lies in thinking that both accounts are addressed as answers to one and the same question; they are not. On the one hand, the non-reductionist account asserts that its rival is fatally flawed, but then goes on to provide arguments against an answer proposed to a different question than the one which is the object of the reductionist's concern. However good or bad these arguments may be in themselves (and we have already seen several problems) they are not adduced in support of the central assertion. That assertion is left without adequate support—it is a bare assertion. On the other hand, the reductionist account argues that any further theory such as the rival one here is fatally flawed, and then does provide arguments for this assertion. The problem then is not the lack of arguments but with the fact that these arguments remain inconclusive. For on what other final grounds than parsimony are we to accept such a thoroughgoing and barely credible skepticism?

A reasonable verdict then is that, although these two views conflict in a number of interesting philosophical ways, we are not compelled

to choose between them. For these accounts, however contrary, are not finally logically contradictory. Consequently, the choice between at least these reductionist and non-reductionist accounts of the nature of the person and of personal identity we may legitimately leave open for further inquiry. We are then rationally justified in trying to see whether several of the most interesting elements in each account can be integrated selectively into our concerns with Rilke's talk of self-transformation.

### **5. Indeterminateness and Future Selves**

One suggestive element in the reductionist account we do well to scrutinize is indeterminateness and future selves. The indeterminateness thesis is the view that, despite natural inclinations to believe otherwise, the answer to the question as to whether any future person must be either me or someone else need not be determinate (P:214). This claim involves the notion that some questions are properly described as empty questions that is, those whose answers would be neither true nor false. The question "Will the entity in the rose garden tomorrow be either me or someone else?" is, in some cases, an empty question in that the choice we are asked to make is not between two different states of affairs but between two different descriptions of the same state of affairs.

But the indeterminateness thesis articulates an issue arising in some cases only, cases like the "combined spectrum" which suggest that, despite my natural inclinations, my beliefs that any future person must be either me or someone else cannot be true. The case, as I shall describe it (after Parfit and Williams) is that of the neuro-biological surgical group which is able to manipulate through electrodes and chemical emplacements and both brain tissue and body tissue transplants the full spectrum of my psychological and physical continuity and connectedness.

At the near end of the spectrum the team would activate only a few emplacements and substitute exact duplicates of only a small percentage of my cells. Accordingly, while losing only a few of my real memories I would acquire only a few apparent memories that fit the life of someone else, and while losing only a few of my actual cells, I would acquire only a few functioning duplicates of my brain tissue and other body tissue as transplants. At the far end of the spectrum the team would revive from much more complex operations an entity who would have virtually no memories that corresponded to my own past and virtually none of the original cells of both my present brain and body. Now, the person reviving from the first operation would almost certainly be me because of the very great, although not full, degree to which psychological and physical continuity and connectedness would have been retained. But the person reviving from the second operation would almost certainly not be me because of the very little degree

to which such interrelatedness would have been retained. But "if any future person must be either me or someone else, there must be a line in this range of cases up to which the resulting person would be me, and beyond which he would be someone else" (P:277). Yet the combined spectrum case shows merely a neuro-biological surgical team making one further psychological change and one further cell transplant. Hence, the question whether the resulting person is either me or someone else is an empty question in the sense that whatever answer we may provide is simply one of two possible descriptions of the same state of affairs. It is conceivable, then, that, despite our deeply seated inclinations to believe that there must always be a deep difference between some future person being either me or someone else, being either Peter in the rose garden or not Peter in the rose garden, in some cases questions about personal identity have no determinate answer.

Consider now the nature of these future persons as indeterminate entities. In the case of future states of what we assume to be our perduring persons, we need to distinguish our descendants from our future selves. We can do so rather simply by recalling that the psychological interrelatedness between the prior and subsequent events of the same person's life are described in terms of psychological connectedness and psychological continuity. In the case of one's future descendants, I want to hold that we are talking pre-eminently about psychological connectedness, whereas in the case of future selves we are talking mainly about psychological continuity. On the reductionist view both relations matter and neither is understood as more important than the other (P:301). But, when we are talking about future selves as opposed to descendants, what matters most is not so much the genetic propensities which foster in one's descendants the development of certain dispositions which are connected with one's own. What matters rather is the actual psychological continuities, memories, intentions, desires, and so on between our present and future selves. So some of our future states are not so much to be understood as our descendants to whom we are both physically and psychologically connected but as our future selves with whom, additionally and pre-eminently, we share certain psychological continuities.

We have already seen that in some cases the answer to certain kinds of questions about our future states is not determinate. We need now to carry this result over to our discussion of future selves. The point of that earlier discussion is that, although our relations with our own future selves involve especially psychological continuities, these continuities are subject to variations. Such continuities which may subsist then between me and my future selves are always a matter of degree. In some cases the relatedness may be so attenuated that a certain question about the identity of a particular future self may be nothing more than an empty question. But what about those other cases where such

a question is not empty? How are we to describe those cases?

In the case of future selves we need to introduce the notion of degrees of both connectedness and continuity. We then can say that the degree of psychological continuity is more or less great as a function of just how much memory, intention, and so on is psychologically continuous between me and any one of my future selves. Notice, however, a problem. How are we to determine such matters of degree when one of the key terms in the relation, namely my future self, does not yet exist? One solution lies in seeing that any one of my future selves is not to be found inalienably fixed to some future time down the course of my as yet unlived life, down the garden path. For my future selves are already anticipated in the present through my imaginings just as my past selves still linger in the present through my remembering. The difference between these two kinds of selves is that past selves are still present and are so in determinate ways whereas future selves are already present but only indeterminately. My suggestion is that we stress psychological continuities instead of connectedness, and that instead of the degree of psychological continuity we stress a particular element in such continuity, what I want to call a basic intention. On this account then my first claim is that Rilke's talk of self-transformation may reasonably be construed as needing to care at least as much for oneself as a future self however indeterminate as needing to care for oneself as an actual person. But such talk of "caring" is obscure.

## 6. Self-Concern and Virtual Persons

Turn now to a suggestive element in the non-reductionist account, the relation in which someone believes himself to stand to his own future states. This relation is called "self-concern" (W:236-56), a relation which "neither is nor includes an attitude towards myself" (241). How then does self-concern differ from other basic attitudes to oneself?

Consider first the attitude one may assume with regard to one's own desires, their fulfillment or frustration, namely "egoism". Egoism consists in a person's believing that his own desires and their fulfillment, regardless of what may be the specific object of such desires, are more important than those of others. By contrast, self-concern involves no preference claim for the superiority of one's own future states over those of others. Thus self-concern does not do away with egoism but it does not presuppose it either.

Consider next the attitude one may assume in seeing the course of one's future life in terms of a harmonious equilibrium between pleasure and pain. This attitude is called "finding life worth living." And it "consists in two things — a concern with whether some future state will contribute to harmony, and the presupposition that one's present states are already harmonious. But, as the case of rational suicide



shows, self-concern does not involve finding life worth living in either of these two respects.

Consider finally the attitude which consists in finding in one's life sufficient conditions for fulfilling those desires, plans, and projects one finds important. This attitude is called "finding life worthwhile." And once again such an attitude involves two elements — concern with whether my future states will contribute to the realization of my projects and the presupposition that my present state already does. This attitude is not the same as the previous one, for it is perfectly possible for someone to find life worth living but not worthwhile, as presumably Napoleon did on St. Helena, and life worthwhile but not worth living, as presumably Saint Peter did in Rome (W's examples). But self-concern involves neither, for self-concern is centered on something other than either the realization of harmony or the fulfillment of projects.

If self-concern then is neither egoism nor finding life worth living nor even finding life worthwhile, it nonetheless depends on the priority of desire for without desire there would be no self-concern. But self-concern characteristically is a matter not of the formation or presence of desire but of its motivational force. Accordingly, self-concern is not an attitude towards oneself nor an indifference to one's own future states but a non-preferential and non-instrumental relation to the importance and value of one's own future states and those of others. Unlike self love, self-concern depends on no one factor. Nor does self-concern depend on any particular feature of the person's psychology as a whole, and it both derives from and is partly constitutive of the process of living as a person. As such self-concern is carefully correlated with the capacity to enter into one's past present and future states of mind as one's own.

On the present account then the nature of self-concern lies in the central contention of the non-reductionist view, namely that something more is required to account for the nature of the person than interrelatedness. What is required is the presence of ourselves as persisting entities irreducible to mere interrelatedness. This persisting presence is to be understood as our ongoing capacity to enter into the fullness of our present states and thereby gain that acquaintance with one's own present states which enables one both to retrieve one's past states and their influence as well as to anticipate one's future states and concern with them as one's very own.

Now this view of self-concern is, I believe, inseparable from the nonreductionist view of the person because it depends upon the claim that a persisting entity is required for the explanation of the identity of persons over time. That claim, however, includes the view that the question whether some future person is me or someone else must always have a determinate answer. But recall that we need not choose between the reductionist and the non-reductionist accounts. Hence we



may assert that in some cases such a question may have no determinate answer. In the light of the non-reductionist description of self-concern I want to suggest that the set of future states to which I stand in the relation of self-concern described here is usefully described as a "virtual person." I may stand then in a relation of self-concern, I will say, to my future self not just as an entirely indeterminate entity but as a vaguely determinate entity I call a virtual person.

Recall finally the discussion of weak and strong kinds of psychological continuity, for this will give us the distinction we need to parse the unfamiliar notion I am proposing here of virtual person. In cases of those future selves with whom I now enjoy by anticipation strong bonds of psychological continuity, I want to speak not of future selves but of virtual persons, whereas in cases of those with whom the degrees of continuity are much less strong we may continue to speak of future selves. Virtual persons thus are intimately linked not so much with memory, desire, character, and/or disposition as they are with basic intentions. In thinking of myself in the future, I may entertain a number of scenarios in each of which one of my future selves plays a more or less central role — in short, I may fantasize (see Morton 1985). But when I think of myself in the future, I may just as well articulate a number of scenes in each of which the same virtual person struggles to fulfill a basic intention to realize a life ideal which is already at the basis of my own multiple strivings here and now in the present—I may imagine. In the first case, the entity in question is clearly the object of some of my present psychological states. But no matter how richly detailed such a future self may be nor how many such selves may be fantasized, no one of them on the present terms can bear the burden of that peculiar kind of psychological continuity I am calling here my perduring basic intention to realize a life ideal. On these terms, however continuous such similar entities as future selves may be with respect to my present dispositions and desires, only a virtual person can be continuous with my present basic intentions. In other words (P:315-6), all my future selves are clearly my descendants but they are not all equally my relatives; some, my virtual persons, are more centrally related to me than others. On this account then I want to revise my initial claim to read that Rilke's talk of self-transformation may reasonably be construed as coming into a standing relation of self-concern with at least one of those imagined future selves I call my virtual person.

## **7. Reinterpreting Fictions of Self-Transformation in Rilke's Late Poetry**

In February 1922, after the beginnings at Duino ten years earlier and in a small house at Muzot in the Valais in Switzerland, Rilke suddenly, "with the same breath," in no more than one month, writes 26

sonnets, finishes the elegies, and then completes the second half of the sonnet cycle with 29 more while writing 8 other sonnets besides. Rilke succeeds here, we are told, in transforming his art by replacing the figure of the angel with that of Orpheus and in transforming himself.

In an initial citation from Sonnets I.5 the critic identifies the speaker as Rilke.

Erect no gravestone to his memory; just  
let the rose blossom each year for his sake.  
For it is Orpheus. Wherever he has passed  
through this or that. We do not need to look

for other names. When there is poetry,  
it is Orpheus singing. He lightly comes and goes.

Rilke is said to have found in these lines a way of interiorizing and transforming "the sense of abandonment" which had followed on the discovery, definition, and relinquishment in the first two elegies written in 1912.

If this sonnet provides us with a glimpse of Rilke's return to the Orpheus figure, the third is said to exhibit a breakthrough in the formulation "song is reality." The breakthrough consists in Rilke's relinquishment, not just of any residual belief in the genuineness of an unstillable hope for perfect fulfillment as in the figure of the angel in "The First Elegy," but in his relinquishment also of any further representation in his poetry of the attractiveness of such an illusion.

Creature of habit, Rilke compares us in Sonnets I.3 with Orpheus and is again dismayed:

A god can do it. But will you tell me how  
a man can penetrate through the lyre's strings?  
Our mind is split. And at the shadowed crossing  
of heart-roads, there is no temple for Apollo.

A passage in "The Third Elegy" is said to exhibit "the change," from the earlier relinquishment to the later one. The idea seems to be that in the transition from the imagery of the passionate voice of desire, the wooing voice, to that of the pure voice of need, the bird's cry, Rilke has brought about a transformation not in his poetry but arguably in his own understanding of himself. And this transformation is said to "culminate" in "The Ninth Elegy," where the poem is taken to be saying that living in the world is singing in the sense of praising.

...when the traveler returns from the mountain-  
slopes into the valley,  
he brings, not a handful of earth, unsayable to others,  
but instead  
some word he has gained, some pure word, the yellow and  
blue  
gentian. Perhaps we are here in order to say: house,

bridge, fountain, gate, pitcher, fruit-tree, window —

.....  
Here is the time for the *sayable*, here is its homeland.

Speak and bear witness.

This kind of saying issues in a speaking, a singing (a making of celebratory works of art, poems of praise) which transforms our way of being in the world in such a way that our primary relation to everything else becomes one of affirmation, the "this is" of Rilke's friend's, of Paula Modersohn-Becker's painting, to be saying: "Being human... is to be constantly making one's place in language, in consciousness, in imagination. The work 'steige zurück in den reinen Bezug,' is 'to rise again back into pure relation'" (Hass, xli).

Now what are we to make of all this? I would suggest that we construe this kind of reading as a serious and thoughtful series of recommendations about what I want to call the ethical shapes our own future selves might well assume as virtual persons.

Much of the argument for such a suggestion would involve a far more sustained examination of the complicated evolution of Rilke's late work than we have leisure for now. But at least three major notions appear in the course of that work. The initial idea is surely one of change at a rather abstract level. In "The Seventh Elegy," for example, Rilke writes:

Our life

passes in transformation. And the external  
shrinks into less and less. Where once an enduring house was,  
now a cerebral structure crosses our path, completely  
belonging to the realm of concepts, as though it stood in  
the brain.

"Transformation" here must be understood in larger terms than merely psychological ones, terms that would account for the shift in Rilke's poetry from talk of a turn (*eine Wende*), to change (*eine Wandlung*), and finally to transmutation (*eine Verwandlung*).

A second major notion in this development is the gradual deepening of what is meant by "a relation." Here the movement is from talk of a mere relationship with persons and things (*eine Verhältnis*) to a stress on relation as such (*ein Bezug*), to the insightful idea of standing in a relation to whatever is (*in eine Beziehung stehen*). And finally Rilke's work moves even more richly from a sustained reflection on nothing and nothingness (*das Nichts*) to a richly modulated meditation on the more complex notion of the void, of emptiness (*das Leere*). This extraordinary meditation yields many images, among them the image of a breath. Thus, not long before he died Rilke wrote in one of his uncollected poems,

It is nothing but a breath, the void.  
And that green fulfillment  
of blossoming trees: a breath.

And he brought his "Sonnets to Orpheus" to an end with the lines:  
 Silent friend of many distances, feel  
 how your breath enlarges all of space.

### **Conclusion**

The aim of this paper has been to try to understand more clearly several issues which questions about putative self-transformation in Rilke's late poetry would seem to raise. And the strategy has been to examine two contrasting views on the nature of the person with a critical interest first in whether these accounts are exclusive in the sense that holding one entails not holding the other and if not then, second, just what conceptual resources each might make available for pursuing our aims further. The argument has been that even such carefully opposed views as the reductionist and non-reductionist ones examined here can be articulated in other ways than as simple logical contradictions. When so formulated each provides us with at least one central notion that furthers our concern. On such a reading the reductionist account turns out to include an important notion about such future entities as indeterminate selves, whereas the nonreductionist account includes an equally important idea about the nature of self concern. The first, the idea of indeterminate entities, I go on to argue provides us with a way of construing the rationality of our concerns with our own future selves. And the second, the idea of self concern, makes available a way of construing our ethical responsiveness to ourselves as virtual persons. Accordingly, I want to conclude that Rilke's talk about self-transformations, about becoming a certain type of person in the future, is usefully recast as a question about what it means to be a person and about whether some future persons can be properly taken as the legitimate subjects of both rational and ethical concerns in the present.

I must now add that such a conclusion is not so much an answer to our initial question as an invitation to investigate more thoughtfully what responding to such a question would seem to involve. This invitation cannot be pursued just now. But while concluding it may not be unhelpful to indicate in a quite programmatic way at least one of the many directions such further inquiry could well take.

Accordingly, I would want to argue further that the rationality of our moral concern for ourselves as fictive selves and the ethical responsiveness we have for our future selves as virtual persons have at least one major consequence on how we think about future states of those curious entities we call ourselves. My argument would be that thinking of oneself as rationally and ethically responsible for, although not morally obligated to, one's own fictive self as a virtual person entails that we construe our present selves as those peculiar sorts of fictions I would call fictive persons. Such entities are not

selves. Rather, they are best understood as selfless persons in the sense that whatever self such entities may properly be thought to have is an illusion. Moreover, fictive persons are not just persons *tout court* because whatever it is we refer to in such a context as "a person" is properly understood not so much as an illusion but as a conceptual construct which is necessarily subsequent to the richness of predicative immediate experience. Rather, fictive persons I would suggest are better understood on the model of fictional characters. This analogy would lead us finally to the view that those peculiar entities who come to understand fictive selves as the ongoing realization of a rational and ethical responsiveness to the deep pathos of things are neither selves nor persons but simply quasi-personal and efficacious fictions, or no persons at all. In the light of such a view we might then be able to see that the general question here about peculiar kinds of fictions — how are we to understand the "I" in such lyric utterances of self-transformation as Rilke's "whisper to the silent earth: I'm flowing. / To the flashing water say: I am" — is neither an open nor an empty question but one which seems to require changes in our usual understandings of personal identity.

The same breath that filled "the small rust coloured sail of the Sonnets and the Elegies' gigantic white canvas" in February 1922 expired in these lines addressed to the mysterious figure of Orpheus, a fiction, a figure of self-transformation, a virtual person:

Silent friend of many distances, feel  
how your breath enlarges all of space.  
Let your presence ring out like a bell  
into the night. What feeds upon your face

grows mighty from the nourishment thus offered.  
Move through transformation, out and in.  
What is the deepest loss that you have suffered?  
If drinking is bitter, change yourself to wine.

In this immeasurable darkness, be the power  
that rounds your senses in their magic ring,  
the sense of their mysterious encounter.

And if the earthly no longer knows your name,  
whisper to the silent earth: I am flowing.  
To the flashing water say: I am.

(Sonnets, II.29)

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> To W. Hulewicz, 13 November 1925, tr. S. Mitchell, in Rilke 1982, 316. Further references in the text are to this edition.
- <sup>2</sup> Hass, in Rilke 1982, xi - xlv.
- <sup>3</sup> Cf. Rilke's comment in the letter above to Hulewicz: "The angel of the Elegies is that creature in whom the transformation of the invisible into the visible...already appears in its completion...; that being who guarantees the recognition of a higher level of reality in the invisible."
- <sup>4</sup> Parfit 1984; subsequent references are incorporated in the text.
- <sup>5</sup> Strawson 1984, 44.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>7</sup> Williams 1984, 14.
- <sup>8</sup> Wollheim 1985, 2. Subsequent references are inserted in my text.
- <sup>9</sup> See Morton 1985, 688.
- <sup>10</sup> Elster, 1983.
- <sup>11</sup> Elster, *ibid.*
- <sup>12</sup> I rely here on Parfit's discussion. Further references to Parfit and Wollheim are incorporated in the text and preceded by either "P" or "W".

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